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McCain: "We are all Georgians now."

By extending NATO --westward beyond the borders of the old Warsaw Pact, and proposing¹ to go westward still further beyond the borders of the old Soviet Union (Ukraine, Georgia) --the US is "extending deterrence" (of conventional attack, by threat of US FU) to the very borders of Russia.

¹ Today in antiwar.com:

Biden Backs NATO Membership for Ukraine

VP to Head to Georgia as Saakashvili Seeks Weapons

by Jason Ditz, July 21, 2009

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Speaking in Kiev today on the first stop of a trip to the Black Sea region, Vice President Joe Biden backed Ukrainian membership in NATO, saying the nation had the right to choose which alliances it wanted membership in and assuring the nation that the recent attempts at rapprochement with Russia would not harm US ties with Ukraine.

The visit comes at a time when Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's popularity has reached what almost has to be a low point, with some opinion polls showing his support at as little as 2%. The President took power during the 2004 Orange Revolution, but his government has made few of the promised changes and lost the support that swept him to office.

Russia vigorously opposes Ukraine's prospective membership in the rival NATO alliance, fearing that it would cost it the key Sevastopol naval base and place NATO forces along their common border. The Ukrainian economy is largely dependent on an open border with Russia, which officials say would not survive NATO membership.

Biden's next stop is the Republic of Georgia, another would-be NATO member along Russia's border. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has been pressuring the US for more weapons to rebuild the military that was largely destroyed during their failed August 2008 invasion of South Ossetia. Saakashvili says that failure to provide him weapons would "encourage" a Russian invasion.

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For forty years (1949-89) the major rationale for the size and posture of US strategic forces was the "need" to back up US/NATO threats of FU against massive Soviet forces in East Europe, to deter their invasion of our closest industrial allies in West Europe. Soviet forces did have the capability to launch a blitzkrieg against West Europe: whether or not that they had any intention of doing so, whether or not their capability was as large and ready as we claimed officially, and whether or not they would have been sure of success, even if the conflict remained non-nuclear. Plausibly, they could reliably be assured of defeat only if confronted by a nuclear defense.

And since that was virtually certain to escalate to all-out nuclear war, and a US first-strike against the SU looked "preferable" (measurably less catastrophic) than a second-strike, a plausible threat of a US preemptive attack looked essential to deter a Soviet invasion (if it needed deterring). (An alternative would have been a negotiated removal of the Soviet capability to attack conventionally, which Gorbachev actually initiated unilaterally in 1987: though at the cost of losing control of East Germany and East Europe).

Moreover, during the Cold War, many or most of our potential adversaries (threatening US clients or allies, defining the "Free World") were clients or allies of the SU (or China). US FU against them incurred the possibility of SU limited nuclear retaliation in kind. To make the US threat of FU plausible, it had to have a basis for deterring Soviet nuclear response. That had to be a plausible threat of nuclear escalation, which in turn, to be credible, had to be based on a credible belief that the Soviets would not match it (or raise the stakes to a Soviet first-strike). That belief could only be based on Soviet fear of provoking a US first-strike (if not by their first, limited response to US FU, then by any further escalation). It had to be sufficiently credible that the US would, at some early point, launch a first-strike against the SU, with sufficient hope that it could disarm the SU and come out either unscathed or with "acceptable" damage.

Thus, the need for a high level of damage-limiting counterforce capability in US strategic forces was based on the need to control an informal empire up to the borders of China and the Warsaw Pact, by plausible threats of US FU against Soviet forces.

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To threaten credibly a threat of first-use, you have to be seen (as William Perry would put it: as in, it would be helpful if the US "is seen as working for the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons") as having a plausible basis for believing that you will not evoke a nuclear response against your own forces, ally or country.

That was no problem when we had a monopoly of nuclear weapons, as the US, alone of all the nuclear weapons states (NWS) did from 1945 to 1949. According to Truman, he threatened the SU over northern Iran in 1946. He certainly exploited this threat-advantage against the SU over Berlin in 1948, if they had interfered with our air access to Berlin. And in November, 1950, when Truman and the JCS considered the possible use

of atomic weapons against the Chinese offensive in Korea, and Truman raised this explicitly in a press conference, only a year had passed since the Soviets had first tested an atomic device and they could be presumed to have a tiny stockpile, if any.

Throughout this period, the small US stockpile of weapons gave a good deal of assurance that the Soviets would not launch an offensive into Germany or West Europe (if there were any basis to the fear that they would use their large—though exaggerated, in Western estimates—conventional forces to that end).

(Those same forces, however, were a strong counter-deterrent to an initiation of nuclear attacks on the SU by the US, say, over any of the above conflicts. The Harmon Study calculated that such a nuclear attack, though devastating to the society of the SU, would not prevent the Soviet forces from occupying West Europe).

After our monopoly was broken, by the SU, the arena for making first-use threats credibly would seem, at first glance, to be against adversaries who did not possess nuclear weapons (everyone but the SU, and soon, Britain and France). But most of the countries we contemplated threatening, or did threaten, during the Cold War had some connection with the Soviet Union. This included:

North Korea,

China (which faced, along with North Korea, Eisenhower's FU threats in 1953, and again in the Taiwan Straits crises of 1955 and 1958),

the Warsaw Pact countries of East Europe (which reopened a Berlin Crisis in 1958-62),

North Vietnam (against which Eisenhower offered nuclear weapons to the French in 1954, and which was subject to a continuous US FU threat deterring an offensive to occupy South Vietnam for the rest of Eisenhower's term, especially after the US-encouraged failure to hold elections in 1956, as agreed in the Geneva truce negotiations, went far toward legitimizing such a renewed offensive),

Laos (where Eisenhower, in his last pre-inauguration talk with JFK representatives, warned of the possible need to use troops and, if necessary against Chinese intervention, nuclear weapons),

Egypt (in the Suez Crisis of 1956, and again in 1973, in both of which the Soviets wielded nuclear threats), and

Cuba, from 1961-62.

A rare example of a crisis invoking US nuclear threats against a non-Soviet ally was the Lebanon Crisis of 1958, which was really a crisis centered on Iraq, where it was feared that a new coup regime might take over Kuwait: foreshadowing the Gulf War of 1990-91.

In all of these other cases which did evoke US nuclear FU threats, there was some concern, and some basis for it (though probably exaggerated in official thinking, especially considering the extreme imbalance in nuclear capabilities that existed throughout that period) that if the US was called on to carry out its threats there might be some nuclear retaliation by the Soviets. However small that chance seemed, there was needed a basis for making it even smaller.

That basis was a first-strike capability against the SU which the Soviets would fear to provoke by any nuclear response to US FU against one of their allies. It would not necessarily be the first US response to the Soviet attack, if the latter were not against US forces but against a US ally. But the US wanted the Soviets to fear that they would at least raise the stakes, "go up the escalation ladder" (in Herman Kahn's phrase), by a larger US nuclear riposte, which the Soviets could match only by invoking a higher chance, perhaps a certainty, of a US first-strike against the Soviet Union.

But just as the threat of a first-use was only credible if there was a strong likelihood (not necessarily a certainty) that it would be unilateral, not evoking any nuclear response, so the credibility of a threat of a US first-strike against the SU (which was the main basis for the first assurance) was conditional on some confidence that it would not lead to the destruction of the US. Preferably, there should be a basis for believing that it would disarm the SU totally—at least, of its capabilities to hit the US—or least, to the extent that retaliatory damage to the US would be limited, not total.

To the uninitiated, it might well seem that to be credible at all, both the threat of FU and the threat of first-strike would require absolute confidence that neither would lead to any nuclear retaliation at all against the US, or even against one of its allies. But the internal, classified discussions within the US do not indicate, surprisingly, that this was a requirement. There is almost no consideration at all given to possible retaliation against an ally. The allies themselves—Britain in the case of Truman's threat against Korea in 1950, France in connection with Dienbienphu—showed concern about that, unmatched in Washington.

As for retaliation against US forces or the US for US FU against a SU ally, Khrushchev explicitly warned that he would destroy the US Seventh Fleet if the US attacked China with nuclear weapons in 1958, and US officials took the threat of at least some Soviet nuclear reply seriously, yet this did not at all preclude their planning for FU if necessary to defend Quemoy and Matsu. And if the Soviets had used tactical nuclear weapons against US invasion forces in Cuba in 1962 (when Khrushchev had, unknown to the US, delegated control of such weapons to his local commanders), McNamara has declared his certainty that he and JFK would have launched a full attack against the Soviet Union despite their expectation that this would not preclude massive destruction in the US and total devastation of Europe.

Still, if the balance had been the other way (strongly in favor of the Soviets, instead of the US) or even closer to parity in 1962 or earlier, it is hard to conceive of Truman, Eisenhower or Kennedy either making the threats they did or taking the stands they did in

any of these confrontations. Thus, it is very implausible to suppose, as some, such as McGeorge Bundy, have concluded, that the strategic nuclear (im-)balance had no influence at all on presidential decision-making during this period (beyond rhetorical declarations, bluffs). The difference it made to actual outcomes in confrontations, and the individual and collective value of these differences, may well seem limited (and greatly overshadowed by the costs and risks of the nuclear threat regime), but they were not zero. Almost surely, without such threats and the force underpinning that made them somewhat credible, Berlin would have been occupied by East German troops, Quemoy and Matsu would have reverted to Chinese Communist control (a good example of “so what?” but nevertheless...) and Taiwan itself might (or might not) have been invaded, and South Vietnam could not have survived the rejection of nationwide elections in 1956 until the arrival of US divisions in 1965 (which protected it for another ten years).

Thus, the entire US first-strike apparatus during the Cold War was shaped and sized by the objective of making credible first-use threats against Soviet allies backed by a credible threat of a US first-strike against the Soviet Union.

But that link between our tactical nuclear forces and threats and our strategic forces has now been broken, with respect to most of the world, since potential targets of our FU threats are no longer allies of the Soviet Union, which is no more, nor of its heir, Russia, which if not a US ally is regarded even by GW Bush as “not an enemy” and which, in any case, does not extend a “nuclear umbrella” outside its borders, as the Soviets did.

Whatever are the risks of a nuclear response from first-use against new NWS such as North Korea, or later, perhaps, Iran (or potentially, earlier, Iraq or Libya), nuclear retaliation by the other nuclear superpower is no longer among them. There is, therefore, no longer a need or rationale for a disarming first-strike capability against Russia in order to deter it from responding to our FU against such countries. Nor would we need tactical nuclear weapons, or the threat of them, to win any conventional confrontation with any country in the world: **except** for Russia or China, within their own borders, or on the immediate periphery of Russia.

And there is the rub. To include such formerly Soviet states as Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, as Biden is encouraging this week, is to extend not only a commitment of conventional arms in their defense but a threat of FU, which remains a core principle of NATO (and a basis for the US predominance, or even any role at all, within it). FU against Russian troops or territory? That still poses a high likelihood of escalation to all-out thermonuclear war between the two superpowers, with its dangers to all human life. That is true, as it has always been, despite a new US “superiority” comparable—in relative terms (which is highly misleading)—to that of the Fifties. Unlike the Fifties, the absolute destructive power of Russia against the US is comparable to that of the SU against Europe in the early Sixties: a potential for absolute devastation even after a relatively successful US first-strike, especially during a crisis when Russian forces are alerted, but even against (an unimaginable) US surprise attack. That risk is to be threatened, or accepted, in order to enter and perhaps turn the balance in a conflict between Russia and its former territories on its borders?

It is precisely that prospect that is endorsed, as a moral or political imperative, by all those Republicans and some Democrats (including Biden!) who proclaim, "We are all Georgians now." (Not, as it happens, Ossetians.) I.e., we will risk suicide, and omnicide, to deny Russia a claim to a "sphere of privileged influence" (like ours in Central America) on its current borders, which lay within its territory a generation ago. I, for one, do not feel that moral compulsion. (Even for Ukraine, where my own grandfather lived: and left. Granted, as a Jew he wasn't made welcome there.) Am I alone?

I believe the following propositions are true (valid). I would be inclined to call them self-evident, except that I suspect that a large number of elite national security bureaucrats and consultants would not accept them.

We should not, under any circumstances, attack Russian forces or territory with nuclear weapons.

We should not launch a first-strike against Russia under any circumstances: even preemptively, on tactical warning (which will probably be wrong) of an incoming Russian attack.

We should not attack Russian cities, or targets within Russian cities, under any circumstances.

But what about *threatening* (1) first-use against Russians, or (2) a first-strike against Russia: the latter, say, (a) preemption, or (b) as a threatened response to Russian use of nuclear weapons against American allies, or (c) in response to an overwhelming Russian conventional attack against an American ally?

My rejection of these threats can't be said to be self-evident at all, because a much larger fraction of "defense experts" would now endorse them (possibly most of those who would claim to support actual attacks really are defending the necessity of making such threats) and a significant fraction of Congress and the public likewise. But I think they are wrong, even fatally mistaken, and perhaps anachronistic, their thinking inertially persisting from the Cold war.

Without arguing the points here, my position is:

No threats of first-use against anyone, and that includes Russians.

No threats of first-strike against Russia under any circumstances: an abandonment of the infeasible aim (which governs the shape and size of our present strategic forces) of limiting damage by offensive action in a nuclear war with Russia; and an abandonment of

the threat of escalating either a conventional or (God forbid) a limited nuclear conflict with Russia by a US all-out first strike.

If these constraints, these rejections not only of nuclear attacks on Russians (armed as they are and will remain with nuclear weapons) but of threats to initiate attack on them, are accepted:

Not only is there no need for tactical nuclear weapons—since no other possible adversary poses a conventional threat, anywhere, that would compel the US to rely on first-use of tactical nuclear weapons—

But there is no need for 90% or more of the present (reduced) US strategic arsenal. (10% of the operationally deployed warheads is 220 warheads; counting reserves, and weapons “awaiting dismantlement” (in the next ten to twenty years!), it would be 500-1000).

I’m saying that with the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of Russian extended deterrence (their nuclear umbrella) beyond their own borders, there is no need, no strategic rationale, for a US first-strike, “damage-limiting,” “escalation threatening” strategic capability, even for threatening, and thus no need for over 90% of our strategic forces. And this is true *even if the US were to continue to threaten FU against non-Russian adversaries* (as, right now, against Iran, or by Hillary during the campaign, against Pakistan, and in the past against Iraq): *which it should definitely not do*, for lots of other reasons (excluding the Cold War fear of escalation into all-out war with Russia).

Thus, we should immediately dismantle all tactical weapons (and strongly challenge Russia to do the same), once having adopted NFU (no-first-use). And we could just as quickly begin to dismantle 90% or more of our strategic forces.

I would say (along with Lodal and Daalder, and contradicting the FAS/NRDC force proposals for minimal deterrence) that all US land-based missiles should be dismantled as quickly as possible. This could well be done unilaterally, calling on the Russians to reciprocate, with mutual inspection. Or, if the USG came to accept this proposal (in Foreign Affairs! OK, fat chance that this could be accepted quickly, against USAF rage at being written out of strategic nuclear operations, and their allies in Congress, the MIC and unions) it could almost surely be part of a quickly-negotiated deal on an overall weapons ceiling with Russia. Russia would *not* dismantle all its land-based missiles, which are the heart of its forces.

That move alone would virtually eliminate the current dangers of (1) a preemptive attack by either side (if US Trident warheads were also limited in number, relative to remaining Russian forces); and 2) a preemptive attack based on false warning. The Russians would have no hope of limiting damage by destroying US forces they could target (the threat to them would be from submarines). The only nuclear military targets they could attack would be subs in port and command and control. The US would not have any part of their force subject to the imperative of “use or lose,” nor (under the above condition) any

prospect of limiting damage significantly by attacks by the limited SLBM force on Russian land-based missiles.

The problem of "hair-trigger alert" and its vulnerability to false alarms would be eliminated. Along with (if the ceilings were low enough: say, below 1000 total for both sides, or lower) the danger of nuclear winter. (This would not eliminate the danger of major environmental disturbances—e.g., to the ozone layer, or regional climatic change, or damage to crops—from much smaller exchanges, as between India and Pakistan. This can be eliminated only by a close approach to abolition. Neither these dangers nor nuclear winter are even mentioned by either the Perry-Schlesinger Report to Congress nor the Perry CFR Report.)